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ENGLAND IN THE MEDITERRANEAN.

BY ADMIRAL P. H. COLOMB, ROYAL NAVY.

To one who has been watching it, the change in the public view of her naval position and policy which has taken place in Great Britain during the last twenty years is surely one of the most remarkable signs of the times. It seems almost impossible to believe that only four and twenty years ago the reduction of British naval force to the lowest possible terms was the favorite plank in the political platform of a popular ministry. But it was so. The government of Mr. Gladstone which came into office in 1869, with Mr. Childers as its instrument at the head of the Admiralty, was cheered to the echo in its design of cutting down naval force to a mere shred, with the sole *per contra* of a reduced budget. The voices that were then raised in protest were feeble and far between ; and they were drowned in the roar of applause which welcomed each stroke as it fell upon our ships, upon our men, and upon our officers. Mr. Childers was present, far in the rear, and almost hidden in the crowd, at the great meeting which took place in the city of London towards the close of last year, and one could not avoid speculating on the nature of his thoughts as he listened to the denunciations of his bygone policy by stanch Radicals, and the cheers with which his condemnation was inferentially greeted.

But in those days of the "Know-Nothings" the naval position of Great Britain was the last consideration that entered ministers' heads. It was not one to have germinated there, and the navy, which might have spoken, had neglected the study which could have given it voice, and was either silent or trumpeted with an uncertain sound. It has been common since to say that in 1870 the folds of the Peninsula and Waterloo had wrapped away the meaning and memory of Trafalgar. Men did not rouse them-

selves sufficiently to remember that the greatness and beauty of those historical structures were due to the solid naval pillars which supported them. The apathy of the navy is also ingeniously accounted for by the daily life of its officers when afloat. Long sea cruises, and longer stays in remote ports, cut the communications of naturally reflective officers with their fellows, and withered, like a want of rain, the buds of thought. I rather incline to add to these causes of naval failure to realize and enforce the situation the internecine wars that raged in the bosom of the service. Steam was fighting sail; iron and steel were fighting wood; rifled guns were fighting smoothbores; breech-loading was fighting muzzle-loading; the torpedo was rousing itself, and armor-plating was fighting everything. The naval mind was so engaged in watching the contests of these combatants, and in backing, now one and now another, that it had no leisure to look around and to see to what lengths the eager and ignorant politicians might be carried.

But the mischief of 1870 was like a sudden shower-bath to the navy, and recalled it from the fever of internal questionings to the consideration that all might be broken up together by the waves of a public opinion which rolled on without aim or method. After this we may see a gradual revival of the study of naval history from the philosophical side; and out of the study we can see gradually arising rooted convictions on the subject of our naval condition and status. Naval men have been impelled to write and speak because they themselves, on looking back, have reached a knowledge of their former blindness. Their words, flowing from reasoned sources, have gradually made their way. Laymen of all positions have been awakened. Many have searched the naval scriptures daily whether these things were so; and the whole flood of an accumulating knowledge has, in a sense, piled itself in the great works of an American naval officer. We cannot lose sight of the weight Captain Mahan's books have had with the British public. It is not alone the beauty of their style, their admirable lucidity, their logical sequence, and their depth of thought which have given them power. Great weight belongs to all these elements, but the greatest weight of all is the sense of confirmation from an independent, and certainly impartial, authority, of all that the possibly prejudiced English naval officer has been for twenty years struggling to impress on his countrymen.

For some five and thirty years, until eight or ten years ago, the panic of the English mind was a lost battle with the French—or, it might be, with the Germans—on the Sussex Downs. In 1859 a royal commission sat, which laid it down, amid general approval, and with scarcely a naval voice raised in opposition, that it was not to be expected that England would ever bear the cost of keeping her command of the Channel in war. It was distinctly inferred that the true defence of the British islands was a perfected system of coast defence; and a great group of ships, suitable for no other purpose, was put upon the stocks. “To keep our shores inviolate” by something which was attached to them was the completion of the idea of the patriotic Englishman; and few minds grasped the fact that such an aim would secure their ultimate desecration, just as the aim of the Parisian *enceinte* ended in the march of the Prussians through her streets.

It was not until 1867 that Sir John Colomb, in a remarkable pamphlet, under the title of *The Protection of Our Commerce in War*, scattered all such theories to the winds, and showed that water territory was only different from land territory in degree, not in kind; and that as the only real protection of Paris was the defence of France, so the only real defence of the British islands was the command of the sea. And this was for an identical reason: because neither Paris nor the British islands were self-sustaining. Because the conquering of the communications of Paris with France was the conquest of France and Paris within it; and because the conquest of the sea by the enemy was the conquest of all non-self-contained islands within its boundaries. The growing sense of this very simple position has been now, for several years, working like leaven in the British mind, and we can see it fermenting and developing as the months go on. The Minister in 1870 was content—and the acquiescence of Parliament showed that it also was content—to draw the numerical comparison between the naval forces of France and England, and to assume that the position was a safe one when British naval forces were not inferior. Preparation for the calm reception of such an idea had certainly been made by the Royal Commissioners of 1859, which allowed witnesses to sketch, and accepted their sketches of, hypothetical war positions which now read like the inconsequent arguments of a child. It was gravely laid down that we should be prepared,

in war time, to see an enemy's fleet blockading or attacking Portsmouth or Plymouth, while our own fleet remained fifty or one hundred miles to the westward, "protecting our commerce." When even expert thought was in such a condition, it was no wonder that simple political thought was incapable of observing that a mere equality with the naval forces of France would leave the British Empire at her mercy, because of the impossibility of defending an extensive water territory by merely equal forces against the necessarily unexpected attacks of an enemy whose hands were free.

It was an advance when we saw that we must at least have a naval force considerably superior to that of France ; and on such a basis began the era of the counting of noses. It was always the easiest task to count ship against ship in each nation ; and when the balance was shown to be against us, a simple and forcible appeal to the public was made. But in reality we might have gone on counting noses till the end of time, and yet have made no advance. It was the appeal to history and the putting of hypothetical cases of war which gradually undermined, and then destroyed, let us hope forever, the theories of the Gladstone-Childers *régime*. Nothing indeed was capable of thinning the density of that block of un-thought but the putting of cases. What amount of property had we *always on the sea* ? Scores of millions of pounds. What was the inflow and outflow of our foreign trade ? Seven to eight hundred millions of pounds in value, and from ninety to a hundred millions of tons in bulk. How did we stand as ship-owners ? Half the tonnage of the whole world carried the British flag. Such facts, when pondered over, sank the value of the mere territorial possession of the United Kingdom, and showed that the greatness and power of that which we call "England" was the activity of all the peoples which bowed to the sovereignty of the Queen and Empress. In the check which war might impose upon that activity, the real danger was to be seen ; and there could be no doubt but that enemies with heads on their shoulders would never dream of facing the risks of violating the land of thirty-eight millions of people, until they had first succeeded in reducing them to a state of coma.

Then came the question, How much of the import into the British islands was food ? And, Was it possible for the islanders to subsist with that supply cut or even seriously checked ? Half

the bulk of the imports—between 11,000,000 and 12,000,000 tons—was food, and it was a supply of nine pounds per day for each family in the kingdom. Counter-propositions were, however, put forward by those who had as yet failed to see that there was no essential difference between land roads and water roads, and that the twenty thousand ships which were required to bring in the food could scarcely pass through the enemy's, lines.

Such broad considerations as these were assimilated in the course of time and led to the "Northbrook programme" of 1884. Of course there was here a counting of noses. There always must be this, but it is the deeper sense of our strategical position which led to it, and gave the figures their force. Study went on after the launch of the Northbrook programme, and the views of "the man in the street" grew more and more into accordance with plain fact. The counting of noses became possessed of a graver significance, and in 1888 began the strong movement which led to the Hamilton programme of 1889.

But there was here a most remarkable change. Hitherto whatever might have been the growing sense of reality which was attached to naval affairs, programmes, when they came out, were more based on the question of noses than are the real strategic requirements. Even naval men of reflection and experience were found—and not in small numbers—whose ultimate decision took the form of demanding ship for ship, and two for one of the French Navy. The fallacy of placing the British and the French in identical strategical positions was far from being exploded. The gist of thought which developed into act was similar to that which makes all "temperance" societies "teetotal" societies in the end. As methods of inducing temperance—or moderate use—require thought, consideration, and explanation before adoption, a certain weariness creeps in and the total abstinence, with decision which requires less thought, has it all its own way, so the classes, sizes, and numbers of war ships which the strategist proposes to build presuppose a scheme of strategy; a certain definite course of action on the outbreak of war. But the adoption of such a scheme requires great precedent labor and thought, and long, intricate explanation to follow. The weariness creeps in, and the definite rule which may or may not have thought behind it carries the day.

In the Hamilton programme, however, a strategical base was plain ! Three classes of ships were built. The battleship, as the representative of defence, the imperturbable holder of occupied waters ; the cruiser, as the protector of commerce in waters held by the battleships, but liable to be raided by the flying "commerce-destroyer"; and lastly the "anti-torpedo-boat-vessel," specially designed as the in-shore watcher of the enemy's war ports. It was not alone, therefore, the number of ships—though 70 was a substantial addition—laid down in the Hamilton programme which gave repose to the reflective naval mind : it was more the revelation of definite strategical policy at the Admiralty, and the sense that principle, well thought out, was dominating the provision of naval force even as it had dominated a hundred years before. The pause which showed itself as the Hamilton ships approached completion was in part due, no doubt, to mere satiety. But amongst the bulk of naval officers it was deliberate. Silence was for long preserved by them in fear of a possible reaction. There was less cry for shipbuilding, and more for an examination, closer, and ever more close, into our real position in the event of war. But the Hamilton programme, while really resting on deep principles, was not above defending itself by the methods of the total abstainer. Some measure or standard was necessary to appeal to the bulk of a parliament and a people which had perhaps as little inclination as they had leisure to investigate the reasoning upon which the classification in the Hamilton programme was based. Advantage was taken of the *rapprochement* between France and Russia, and the standard set up was that the naval forces of Great Britain should always be kept equal to those of any two other powers. This standard is, of course, as ineffective as that of equality to France was in 1870. If we then supposed a war with France alone, we were—with only equal naval forces—already beaten, for we could not defend ourselves against a foe the whole of whose energies were embarked in attack. If we supposed an alliance between France and Russia against us, we were no better off if we could only equal their combined naval forces. But the parliamentary standard has served its turn. The peg had been advanced one hole, and a table such as the following, when submitted to the public, makes its mark.

RELATIVE STRENGTH OF THE BRITISH, FRENCH, AND RUSSIAN NAVIES BUILT AND BUILDING AT THE CLOSE OF 1893.

	Battleships.	Coast-defence vessels.	Cruisers.	Torpedo-boats destroyers.
British.....	45	17	130	45
French.....	34	9	65	13
Russian.....	15	14	28	9
French and Russian combined.....	49	23	93	22

In the mere counting of noses, we always find discrepancies, and the above table, which is that published by Lord Hood of Avalon at the end of last year, was amended by Mr. Laird Clowes so as to show 45 French and Russian battleships to 45 British; 51 French and Russian coast-defence ships to 100 British; 101 French and Russian cruisers to 132 British. But evidently the danger or the safety of the British naval position is not involved in niceties. It is either safe or dangerous on broad issues, and the broad issue now raised is the advance which the public view has made since 1888. It is now clearly seen, and as clearly said by men of such high authority as Lord George Hamilton, that in reality the standard of an equal strength to those of France and Russia combined was a mere necessary stop-gap. We must face the real conditions of a war with France and Russia combined against us, and prepare for them. The French are in great strength in the Mediterranean; the Russians in great strength in the Baltic; it cannot be declared for certain that Russian naval strength in the Black Sea may not be joined to the French strength in the great inland sea. Apart from her trade with France, Great Britain has a direct trade with Mediterranean ports of £54,000,000, and she sends £60,000,000 more through the canal. Over one-sixth of her commerce depends on free Mediterranean waters, unless the canal trade can be diverted round the Cape of Good Hope without loss. With German, Danish, Swedish, and Norwegian ports, which must include great traffic within the Baltic, she has a trade of £84,000,000.

Setting aside, therefore, any check upon our general trade which might be inflicted by France in consequence of the position she holds at Brest and in her Channel and Atlantic ports, nearly a third of our total trade hangs upon our power to carry it on

through the Mediterranean and the Baltic seas. Suppose we lost that power, and combined the loss with that which is inevitable from our belligerency with France and Russia : there would be a fall in our foreign commerce from £715,000,000 to £491,000,000.

Clearly the operation of such a check as this, even for a few weeks, might be disastrous to us ; and yet the question is deeper. Supposing we had not the power in the Baltic and the Mediterranean which we so easily held in the Russian war of 1854-6, and were obliged to withdraw from those seas, or either of them : what guarantee could we possibly have that we could close the Straits of Gibraltar, the Sound, and the Belts against the exit of our enemies ? A certain section—not a large one—of naval opinion holds the doctrine, first distinctly put forward by the Royal Commission of 1859, that the exigencies of modern warfare compel the abandonment of the blockade of ports. I suppose that in the United States, after their experience, it must be generally held, as I myself hold, that if there is power to carry it out, the closest blockade ever seen will characterize the next great naval wars. But if the small section of opinion is right, and it is henceforth impossible to blockade—that is, to mask—warships in Cherbourg, Brest, and Toulon, in Cronstadt and Sweaborg, how can it be held possible to close the entrances to the Mediterranean and the Baltic ? No doubt Gibraltar gives certain facilities for the blockade of the Mediterranean. But having facilities and executing the task are hardly the same things. Naval forces aspiring to let nothing pass westward out of the Mediterranean that is not followed up, have simply the task before them of guarding a much wider passage than they would have to guard if it were the entrance to any of the ports named. If we suppose the British blockading forces at anchor in Gibraltar Bay, we only see them offering themselves to the most modern form of torpedo attack, and at the same time leaving the waters free for the enemy to rush through on any suitable cloudy night. Otherwise, if we suppose them at sea, we still observe them offering opportunities for evasion, or, at best, for a pitched battle. If these difficulties exist for masking the enemy in the Mediterranean, where we have distinct facilities, what is to be said of the chances at the entrance to the Baltic, where we have none ?

And now, if the masking of the whole bodies of Russian and

French forces, and warning them off our main trade routes, is not really made easier by our abandonment of the two seas, or either of them, with all our interests therein, where is the gain in such a policy? How can we deliberately contemplate it?

It is comparatively common to hear the opinion expressed in the British Navy that the blowing up of the Suez Canal, and the complete or partial abandonment of the Mediterranean by our naval forces, or at the very least the entire abandonment of the commercial canal route in war, would be a sound policy, and one that would greatly ease the situation. I am quite unable to accept the view, and I do not know what arguments exist to refute the considerations I have put forward above. I can see how much we should lose by ceasing to hold the Mediterranean as the dominant naval force there; how we should lose so many millions of our trade; how we might sacrifice Malta; leave Egypt and India open; facilitate the junction of the Russian Black Sea fleet with that of the French; leave Italy and Austria open to pressure for joining an alliance against us. But I entirely fail to see the *per contra* of advantage. Except, indeed, in one matter which I have never seen alluded to by other writers. If we look at the table of comparative force, we see that France and Russia have twenty-three coast-defence vessels, which are prepared to act within a certain radius of their ports. The British coast-defence ships are not available in the Mediterranean, perhaps not in the Baltic; and it may be equally assumed that French coast-defence ships would not accompany any French fleet sailing from Toulon to pass the Straits; hence it might be said that, in the possible pitched battle off Gibraltar, the British force would be in a better position than it could be within a hundred miles of Toulon. The same might, but yet with less plausibility, be said of a pitched battle in the Skager Rack.

But does not such reasoning only amount to a timorous defence of apathy and idleness? Surely if that is all we can say, the conclusion is to prepare such seagoing forces as may fearlessly show themselves superior to all the forces—seagoing and coast-defence—which France and Russia together can offer in the immediate proximity of their Mediterranean, Atlantic, and Baltic ports.

If we look at the table of comparative force, we see that France and Russia have 23 coast-defence vessels. These are only prepared to act within a limited area round their ports. The

British coast-defence vessels are of similar quality, certainly useless for Mediterranean service, and probably so for Baltic service. A battle fought in the vicinity of Gibraltar would not involve the coast-defence vessels on either side. Consequently, the possible force of the French there is not so great as the possible force within fifty miles of Toulon. Hence it might be said that a strategic advantage would be gained by our keeping out of the radius of the action of coast-defence vessels, and limiting thereby the power of enemies to their seagoing fleets. But we can scarcely say that any advantage of this sort could counterbalance the loss of the £224,000,000 of trade mentioned above. It requires close thinking to estimate with any degree of truth what such a loss might mean, but if we recall the terrible calamity of the cotton famine we may get an idea about it.

The cotton famine was a check to the import of a single raw material. It came at a time of great prosperity, when there was great activity in trade and great increase in shipping; when the revenue was rising and taxes were being struck off at the rate of millions a year, which reduction was carried on all through the famine. The check to cotton import was only 9 per cent. in 1861, 62 per cent. in 1862, 52 per cent. in 1863, 35 per cent. in 1864, and 29 per cent. in 1865. This was nothing in the general trade of the country, yet it pauperized a number of persons, rising from 39,000 in 1861 to 301,000 in 1863, and it forced into banishment 365,000.

A matter of £20,000,000 or £30,000,000 of imports was thus disastrous when everything else flourished. The failure of our Baltic and Mediterranean trade consequent on our inability to hold the waters of those seas in war would be from seven to eleven times as great a loss, and would, on the basis of the above figures, pauperize two or three millions of persons and emigrate a like number. Yet must we add that, if there should be failure, as we have the best reason to expect, in confining the enemy to the far side of the Belts and the Straits of Gibraltar, it would be impossible to measure our loss. It was a well-proved axiom in our wars with France that the mercantile flag of a belligerent will not pass through waters which its war flag does not float in without challenge. When we were driven out of the Mediterranean in 1797, but a single British ship cleared for a Mediterranean port. The shrinkage of the Fed-

eral mercantile marine in 1861-64 was only confirmation of a before-established fact. It is impossible to measure the shrinkage of the British mercantile marine in a case such as we are considering.

Before this article sees the light we shall know what the English government proposes to do to meet the case which is here set out. It is plain that there is nothing hypothetical in it, except the chances of war. We have not force enough, or nearly enough, to hold the Mediterranean and the Baltic in such force as would enable our trade to flow there if France and Russia were allied against us. Parliament must accept the risk of war, and the certainty of what will follow it, if it does not insist on the creation of sufficient force to hold the Northern and the Southern seas and the waters connecting them. There is, so far as we can see, no middle course between creating such a force and running all risks. The question before it is to judge whether, in the event of an insufficient naval programme, the temporary convenience of the budget is a due set-off against the possibilities of war and the consequential collapse.

It is from this point of view that the comparative table speaks with strongest voice. If we could send every battleship we could put our hands on to the Mediterranean, to the Baltic, and off the French Atlantic ports, and keep them there—which we certainly could not do—we should have but 45, against 72 battle and coast-defence ships which the allied enemies would certainly have on the spot. Clearly we should not dare the task. We should certainly abandon all idea of entering either the Baltic or the Mediterranean sea; and we should hope—our only hope—that we might fight one or two pitched battles in such situation as, if they precluded the use of our own coast-defence ships, would also forbid the enemy to use his.

Such appears to me the general situation so far as we can set it out within the limits of an article. The effort we shall make to meet the situation is, we may conclude, no product of a vain imagination, stirred by incipient panic, but a simple piece of business determined by the necessities of the case.

P. H. COLOMB.